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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ADDIS ABABA 000250

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SUBJECT: OPPOSITION LEADERS DISCUSS LOCAL ELECTIONS AND
DEMOCRACY ISSUES WITH PDAS THOMAS-GREENFIELD

REF: ADDIS ABABA 00145

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Classified By: AMBASSADOR DONALD YAMAMOTO FOR REASONS 1.4 (B) AND (D).

11. (SBU) SUMMARY: In a January 18 meeting with opposition party leaders, Africa Bureau Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary Linda Thomas-Greenfield asked about preparations

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for upcoming local elections, progress in democratization in Ethiopia, as well as the recent turmoil regarding the National Electoral Board's (NEB) decisions regarding the Coalition for Unity and Democracy Party (CUDP) (reftel). Opposition leaders told PDAS that they are encountering numerous significant difficulties in preparing their parties for the elections, ranging from intimidation in voter registration to harassment of candidates. They complained that the current environment more resembles the elections in 1995, rather than the relatively successful and open pre-election period in 2005. CUDP party leaders were livid with NEB decisions to give their party symbol and party registration to rivals Lidetu Ayelu and Ayele Chamisso, which they point to as part of a larger Ethiopian Government (GoE) strategy to dismantle the most prominent opposition party in Ethiopia. END SUMMARY.

12. (U) Africa Bureau PDAS Linda Thomas-Greenfield, accompanied by Ambassador, DCM and Poloffs (notetaker), hosted a luncheon on January 18 for opposition party leaders: Bulcha Demeksa, Oromo Federal Democratic Movement (OFDM); Dr. Beyene Petros, United Ethiopian Democratic Forces (UEDF); Dr. Merera Gudina, Oromo People's Congress (OPC), a member party of the UEDF coalition; Temesgen Zewdie, former leader of the CUDP; and Birtukan Mideksa, former vice-chairperson of the CUD and a former detainee.

EARLY HARASSMENT A BAD OMEN FOR ELECTIONS

13. (SBU) Bulcha, Dr. Beyene and Dr. Merera told PDAS that they are actively organizing their respective parties for the local elections, which will take place on April 13 and 20, and have begun to register candidates. However, they said that the degree of harassment and interference from government security forces is making it very difficult for

them, likening the level of openness to the 1995 election period in which virtually no opposition was able to field candidates. Bulcha, in a semi-sarcastic way, told PDAS that if the GoE would simply "slow down the rate" at which they were putting his people in jail, he would be more confident about his party's chances in the elections. Though to date no registered candidates have been arrested, many supporters and many potential candidates have recently been arrested on trumped up charges in recent weeks. (Note: Bulcha separately told Poloff that if any registered candidate is arrested, his party will withdraw from the elections. End Note.) Bulcha said that he has not seen any indication from the government that it is serious about competing fairly in the elections and is unabashedly using its power to suppress opposition parties, proving that Ethiopia will not soon be a true multi-party democracy.

¶4. (SBU) Dr. Beyene echoed the issue of arrest of potential candidates, saying that he is receiving calls daily from around the country regarding supporters being rounded up. Further, he reported that many possible supporters have had difficulties in registering to vote, with some being simply denied because they are known UEDF voters. Dr. Beyene said that the NEB is unresponsive when he raises these issues, which he claims proves that the board is not the independent body it claims to be. (Note: Despite the opposition providing to Post copies of letters of complaint about the detention of specific supporters, the NEB Chair on January 11 told Ambassador that the NEB had not pursued such allegations due to opposition parties, failure to provide specific details in writing. End note). Dr. Merera's OPC party, who the government accuses of harboring outlawed Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) supporters, traditionally has faced more serious abuses from GoE security forces. Despite strong support throughout the Oromiya region, he said that he is having difficulty fielding an adequate number of candidates, with many people afraid to run under his party name for fear of harassment or arrest. Dr. Merera also noted that the NEB is

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now actively staffing local offices in preparation for the elections, but that most of the employees are known ruling party supporters. Pointing out the importance of local elections, he said that "the government appears to be taking no chances" that it will lose seats in local governments.

CUDP LEFT ON OUTSIDE LOOKING IN

¶5. (SBU) CUDP leaders, on the other hand, have been effectively frozen out of participation in local elections. While the contingent of CUDP leaders, both active MPs and those who were recently released from prison, led respectively by Temesgen and Birtukan, had been intending to compete in the elections, the NEB's recent decision to award the party registration to Ayele Chamisso (reftel) has meant that they will not have a party under which to run. Temesgen, having only learned of the NEB's decision earlier in the week, was very agitated in the meeting, insisting that the USG must confront the GoE on its strategy of "dismantling" his party. He warned that the international community must take this issue seriously, saying that he is concerned about how supporters will react to the NEB's decision around election time when they do not have party to vote for. Birtukan, while more tempered in the meeting than Temesgen, repeated the concern for the voters, saying, "It is not just an issue of elections) millions of voters have been deprived of the right to vote for who they want."

COMMENT: PROGNOSIS FOR LOCAL ELECTIONS LOOKS GRIM

¶6. (C) Opposition leaders paint a very pessimistic picture for the local elections. While voter and candidate

registration continues until February 8, the GoE appears more emboldened in its willingness and methods by which to interfere. The opposition openly longs for the relative openness of the 2005 election period, during which candidates and voters alike were eagerly awaiting polling dates. This time around, opposition leaders report widespread voter apathy and fear by potential candidates. Meanwhile, the CUDP, the strongest opposition party in the 2005 pre-election period, has been eliminated from the running before the race begins. Post continues to monitor the pre-election process and will continue to engage with both the opposition and GoE on the need for free and fair elections. PDAS Thomas-Greenfield explained to opposition leaders that the USG, while balancing a range of national interests in Ethiopia, remains fully committed to seeing that the local elections -- and down the road, the 2010 parliamentary elections -- are held in a environment of openness and fair competition. Opposition leaders expressed gratitude and pledged to continue to work toward this goal and towards a peaceful election period. END COMMENT.

17. (U) Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary Thomas-Greenfield was unable to clear on this message before departing Addis Ababa.
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